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HUMANIZING ENGLISH LITERATURE

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The following paper is the record of an experiment, one which grew not so much from pedagogic principles as from a rather catholic love of books. The course described has been required, with variations, for four years in a girls' college-preparatory school in a town with few traditions except the speed with which great fortunes have been amassed. It has been given three years before graduation to young girls varying in ages from twelve to fifteen.

The purpose of the teacher has been to present the whole, from the naïveté of Caedmon to the sophistications of Lord Dunsany, so that the pupils who are studying English literature for the first time may meet it through their emotions and their sense of beauty. To do this, she has tried in every way to show to these little girls so fond of romance, of color, of excitement, and of wonder, so primitive themselves and so inexpressive, the very genuine connection between themselves and the people, real and imaginary, whose struggles and whose dreams create the essence of English literature. The plan has been to present the subject as dramatically and, except at moments, as truthfully as possible. To do this, there must be always as background the vivid picture of the ages through which it develops.

The following is the method. From the beginning, the class must be regarded as a club—political, literary, dramatic, according to the whim of the moment. It must never be allowed to deteriorate into a group of captured children doing a task. Its members must be imbued at once with the spirit of literary fellowship. The very word "club" means a distinct thrill when one is longing to be regarded as a free agent and is instead having a miserable time under the slave drivings of algebra, of Caesar, and of the final dominations of parents. The children are of just that age.

When they enter this class, they are fairly ready to begin. They have usually heard from older girls that literature is more or

less of a game; they have seen the occasional costumes of its members which they know spell mystery and other times. At the first meeting, definite possibilities must be intriguingly hinted. There is magic in certain expressions. Some are: "costumes when you come to *The Merchant of Venice*"; "armor for the Knights of the Round Table, of course"; "extra credits added to monthly marks for all the really good plays you see during the year"; and "Yes, now that you are really grown up, you are to read actual novels instead of girls' books. And if, after two weeks, you are as good as the class was last year, just watch the bulletin board! There will be posted a long list of novels four of which will be talked about just as if you were the people in them. And any number of the others may be read for extra marks." And she is a wise woman who uses such words as "disguise," "pilgrimage," "love affair," "escape," and "thrill" in regard to things ahead.

A textbook should be used and carefully studied. Partly to insure careful reading, the lessons assigned should be rather long, and underlining should be enthusiastically encouraged and occasionally vided. A notebook should be kept and beautified with occasional original compositions based upon some part of the text, with Perry pictures, with post cards, with an original play or so, with quotations (other than those in the textbook) from the works of the authors discussed. A prize will not come amiss. Red ink should not necessarily be frowned upon—it seems to have a lure all its own. When possible, praise should be plentiful. Some rather delightfully astonishing volumes have been produced.

It is best to begin with a careful study of the so-called Anglo-Saxon period. This will prevent the not infrequent surprise of the Freshman who learns at college that Chaucer was not the first English writer. It will, better yet, show the beginning of literature as the vast, thrilling, highly colored pageant which this part of it is. The teacher should add much to what any textbook can give. She should, for example, always describe the personal appearance of the conquered and the conquering as they struggle back and forth. She should tell of the general look of the land before the Saxons. In the telling, she must use all the knowledge of the appealing beauty of English country of today: of the fairy mists, of the lingering

twilights, of the encircling sea. She must paint with as vivid colors as she can, for the children must like the prologue in order to be eager for the first act. Then the prologue itself will never be forgotten. It is, moreover, as fitting an induction to the drama of English literature as is the shipwreck to *The Tempest*.

The method is simple. When the Celts appear in the textbook for the first time, for example, one must see that their temperament is understood, as one would weigh the opening words of the characters in any play to see what kind of folk they may be. Arnold's *Study of Celtic Literature* will keep the teacher. But always the children must work and discover for themselves. Therefore, let any of the club members with Irish friends or dependents tell anecdotes as to what these delightful people are really like. The love of beauty and the sense of humor; the emotional abandon and the lack of steady endurance; the vivid enthusiasms and the blank depressions; the laughter and the tears; the love of beauty and the keen delight in the gruesome—all these traits, and many more, are the same in the soul of a Pittsburgh nursery maid as in those of the Britons who spun legends of Deidre or of King Arthur. Next, the Angles and Saxons must be made real not only by the teacher's describing their appearance as they arrive in their sailing craft over "the whale path," but by her making clear the very picturesque reasons for which they get their names.

The textbook will tell of the gleeman and of the scôp. The latter must in some way be dramatized so that the children will from their first acquaintance with the poet realize some of his more salient features. *Beowulf* should be spoken of at this point as belonging to this age, and the children set to reading it outside of class. Sidney Lanier's *Boys' Beowulf* may not be available. If not, Houghton Mifflin Company publishes a fairly good translation in the cheaper Riverside Edition.

Then, the teacher must describe the coming of the monks, introducing the tale by the well-worn legend of Gregory. It is fortunate if she has herself been to the Island of Iona or to the rugged coasts of Ireland. If not, let her learn from any source the appearance of the sea-coast. Only so can she make vivid the pictures of the early monks driven by a storm to reach England by way of these places.

Next, because of the spiritual beauty of the story, the children must hear of the earnest priest in the rude hall of the Chieftan using as symbol of man's soul the chance flight of the bewildered little bird lost beneath the raftered roof: "We come from we know not whither. We go out we know not to what place." As he captured the imaginations of the ancient, unsatisfied warriors, so the story will capture that of modern, groping little girls.

It will be easy now to picture the crude monasteries and the earnest monks writing their lovely scrolls so brilliant in color, so earnest in tone. If the teacher has her hold upon the imaginations of the class—as she should have—a word at this time should transform prose to poetry, well-known modern walls should disappear, and the club, children no longer but monks even to the missals, should seat themselves at the refectory table placed, for the night is cold, on one side of the great central fire. Twice they should so meet, the gleeman cross-legged on that part of the floor which best pleases him. Let him chant parts of the *Seafarer* rescued from the days of the old gods and made allegoric because of the new. He will find it in any good textbook. Let various of the brotherhood intone the fragments of *Finnsburgh* and *Waldere* and tell of their discovery. Any monk will be enchanted to hold the harp and loudly will he twang the strings to mark the caesura. At the first meeting, Caedmon must leave the table in a shamed and awkward confusion, and return—a proper interim having been indicated—to tell how the vision illumined the stall. "And the Vision said unto me 'sing'; but I could not. Then said it, 'Sing the Creation of the world' and these words fell from my lips." Then he must read any translated version of the first written poem. He will read it with feeling or the teacher is to blame. At the second meeting, Cynewulf may come. Surely, the youngest of the monks, little more than a lad (but time for growing) must beg for a tale of dragons, for *Beowulf*, which the old monks already know. They will not refuse him. On the contrary, each will insist on telling a part, having heard it from the peasants whose fathers have handed down the sagas. Then such a muttering, and a grumbling, and a rumbuling, as Grendel and his vengeful parent and the Firedrake breathe forth flaming words in an ecstasy of passion.

In this class, of course, anyone who wishes to write must be given every opportunity and lure. One very charming three-act play was written and staged by a fifteen-year-old girl, with Caedmon as central figure and the old legend as main plot. It contained frequent songs sung by a scôp, most of them Anglo-Saxon poems hunted to cover in the Carnegie Library. There were in it a number of old chants and prayers looked up by an interested father and intoned by the monks and nuns in the play. The general atmosphere was really beautiful and highly serious. Yet, against the background of the lovely old legend, entirely upon her own initiative, the author had introduced the delightful fairy figure of a little tumbler, "just to give a touch of that Celtic joy and color." The play was presented for the benefit of the Red Cross, by the way, and hundreds of dollars were made. Such an opportunity should never be lost.

As an introduction to the period of French influence *Hereward* which has been one of the bulletined books must be freely discussed. And, remembering her fellow-students, that teacher will be wise who emphasizes not only the traits of the old race and the changes wrought by the new, but also the fact that here is a love story. Then the sentimentally inclined must be permitted to burn with indignation over the wrongs of the Torfrida and the wiles of her rival. Here is a better chance to get certain twentieth-century fourteen-year-old dreams and righteousnesses expressed than ever Harold Bell Wright or Eleanor K. Porter can give. And such feelings—if we are to believe the psychoanalysts—are better out than in. Above all, here is a chance for vicarious adventure, and romancing, and agonizings, and thrills. The sooner one gets the connection between one's self and the people of books the better. But let the teacher look to her list. There was more in the burning bush than the flames; and powerful novels with possibly far reaching results will be ahead.

The textbook as to this part of literature may be supplemented by *Aucassin and Nicolette* read aloud in class by one minstrel teacher and two starry-eyed little girls who are of course speaking the words of the hapless lovers.

Excellent chance for pageantry comes again frequently: with the Age of Chaucer, at which time of course the Canterbury Pilgrims

invade the classroom, each telling one of the old stories in her own words with a single fraction of costume per pilgrim; it comes also with the Renaissance—with every other period when the times show action and the questing soul.

And as to the pageant of the English Renaissance, it will be utterly valueless unless it show that period so full of color that ever afterward its very name will suggest splendor. The age must, moreover, be shown as intensely spiritual in character. I failed entirely in making of the time anything but a resonant name until I realized that I had been extremely stupid in not having the children approach it by way of Italy and her great artists, through a tale or two of its great precursor Dante, through the immortal lovers Petrarch and his Laura. Then the children were ready to remember also the fall of Constantinople and the fleeing intellectuals. Mallory's *Morte d'Arthur*, which the teacher must tell in parts, will help toward understanding, for here is a different Arthur from him they first met. Tyndale must be dwelt upon, and the romance of religion, part of it expressed so strikingly through the adventure of the English translators of the Bible, men all of them, and ready to die for what they believed—and as a matter of course. And, if the teacher try to remember what she herself was really like when she was at the age of the girls who are hearing the very name Renaissance for the first time, she will be dull if she does not realize that the members of the class and this great period have a very great deal in common. So, she will do more than merely point out the splendor of bygone figures and movements. She will also provoke discussion as to what the children think of certain religious and spiritual issues suggested thereby. She will probably find at first only a rather terrified expression. This will soon grow more bold. Then, if she is very human and a trifle crafty, she may even help a little spiritually. She can do this, however, only if she remember constantly that she is herself just a fellow-traveler merely a very, very little farther along the way of understanding.

Enter the players. Let them busy themselves with their notebooks, for the enrichment of which must be given the pleasing dramatic terms, so easy to remember, so thrilling to use. All of this can be done in one lecture and is as easy to remember as a fairy

story. They must learn of the York and Chester players, of those of Townsend and of Coventry, so near to Stratford. They hear of those other children of St. Paul's. They must learn from their textbooks lists of the names of the dramatists before Shakespeare and after him. They must know what a bear pit really looked like so that they can later transform it into a theater. As their brows grow higher they will become more excited. Alfred Noyes has been put into their hands and, overnight, all lesser gods are but the baseless fabric of a vision and the immortal members of the Mermaid meet and call for a cup of brave old wine. Then Burbage shouts for a new actor for the mob at the Globe; someone gaily announces that here is Will Shakespeare; and the awkward fellow joins the golden company.

So, for the first time in all their lives probably except through Lamb, under their own characterizations of his contemporaries these little girls meet the greatest literary genius in all the world. And while they find subject-matter for a biography of him which they must write, the teacher must picture for them sixteenth-century Stratford and London, and eternal greatness. Then it is their turn. And if they are good for much, they tell how a friend dropped into John Shakespeare's shop. But the boy Will was busy wandering under the Warwick sun. So the friend searches for him by the Avon, past enchanted thickets, along a wizard lane. And, on every side, the haunting beauty of the green, green English country, always friendly yokels with whom to chat. (Let the child go so far as to introduce a lark if she be sentimental. After all, atmosphere is the thing!) Then dull Anne Hathaway must marry him out of hand beneath the spell of her climbing roses and of the lingering twilights. Shortly afterward, he must poach the phantom deer and journey up to London, where the raconteur may have happened upon him holding horses before the theater, near the boarding-house where sailors spun tales of other lands. So he is followed through the stage door as a unit of the mob scene of the moment. Then Kit Marlowe tells of the fellow's revision of old plays and of certain collaborations which may have taken place. Ben Jonson says a word for *Love's Labor Lost*. And so to the greatest plays in all the world.

By this time enthusiasm is high or the teacher should resign at once. Yet here she must pause and the girls must learn the names of the poet's chief poems and plays under the four generally accepted periods to which they have been assigned. It will take one lesson only, and the opportunity may never come again.

Then the Burbage Company presents *The Merchant of Venice*, acting as they read, sometimes in costume, always with the school-room an Elizabethan theater. The parts are usually assigned by ballot, the class voting for the best readers as principals. The play is first read quickly at home, not for beauty as yet, but for discovery as to which girls will make the best stars. While it is being acted, some of its loveliest passages are memorized or other plays are read outside of school. Always the children must have assigned work and a great deal of it. Then as one for the first time reads aloud and, reading, acts, is it any wonder that wizardry begins and changes the classroom to the Rialto; the corner with the fern to Belmont; a desk with a heap of books to a court of justice—the glamor before the eyes of fourteen-years-old to a flower-strewn garden vibrant with the voices of lovers beneath “the patines of bright gold”? Frequently, the actors have learned large portions of the text to speak the lines more tellingly. More frequently they have read many others of the plays. One girl during the following two years read twenty, not in Lamb but directly.

Always between acts there must be free discussion of character, of dramatic structure, of artistic nemesis, of all the pleasant, well-sounding technicalities. After the play is finished, papers of all sorts have been produced—the most intriguing, perhaps, those following the characters after the final curtain. Shylock has done everything but repent—so they have learned something after all.

Then if time remains, and it can be more easily taken from less important things if the class is good, to *Romeo and Juliet*, to *Julius Caesar*, to *Macbeth*, to *Hamlet* even. Children old enough to read fluently are not too young for even the great plays. In the greatest, much of the philosophy must be passed over till, grown older, the readers come back to familiar ground and find there all that, as children, they could not see. They can realize much of the beauty of the idea, however; of the poetry of the lines; of the apt phrasing,

of the marvelous character drawing—so they will love Shakespeare as they will no one else in English literature. I have seen little girls at the Court of Denmark with Hamlet, his hesitation over at last, dying on the steps of the throne with his father's crown where it should be, while the King lay panting, her yellow curls flung wide and forgotten as the child portrayed dying, as she fancied it. Round about were other people dead and alive, all acting, all following the great lines with breathless interest. Then Fortinbras gave the command, someone chanted Chopin and there were tears in many eyes. "The rest is silence." But, at least, one may be fairly sure that is how most of the Elizabethans saw and felt their Shakespeare.

To the person who has read so far, further suggestion as to the course will be unnecessary. If, however, he wishes to know what can really be done with the rigor of the Puritans and the court of the Merry Monarch, with the meetings at Will's Coffee House, with the immortal club of Samuel Johnson, perhaps best of all with the Lake School of Poets when spring has come and there is a rustle of wings over the garden, the task is easy. Let him realize only that his intellect and his practical common sense are merely by the way and that it is his imagination and his feelings which are the open sesame to English literature. Let him remember, too, that he need only play the first few notes on the magic pipe and after him the beggars, in rags, and tags, and velvet gowns, will all come gayly tripping.